

2013 World Refugee Day
Charles Shipman
Arizona State Refugee Coordinator

I'm so honored to have the opportunity to speak to you on this occasion of the 2013 World Refugee Day Commemoration - a commemoration shared by many around the world.

On December 4, 2000, a United Nations' General Assembly resolution determined that beginning in 2001, June 20th would be celebrated annually as World Refugee Day - to recognize and applaud the contributions of forcibly displaced people throughout the world.

World Refugee Day is an event that brings to light the spirit of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which is the key legal document for refugee protection, and defines who is a refugee, their rights, and the legal obligations of nation states.

The Convention was a reaction to World War II and refugees fleeing European fascism and genocide, much as our own nation's Refugee Act of 1980, was established as a reaction to Cold War era strife, in particular, to the fall of former French Indochina to Communist regimes.

The Refugee Act is our nation's policy for systematic humanitarian relief for regular flows of refugees...a policy born out of and amidst much anguish.

In 1975, when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese army, the U.S. President at the time, Gerald Ford, couldn't have been in a more unenviable situation. Leading in the fallout of Watergate, he faced the aftermath of two decades of convulsive diplomacy in Southeast Asia, empty guarantees, and promises he couldn't keep - with little political or social interest nationally for responding to the aftermath of a fallen Southeast Asia and the amassing refugees.

Years later President Ford wrote a letter to the group of Marines that evacuated the U.S. Embassy in Saigon saying:

"April 1975 was indeed the cruelest month. The passage of time has not dulled the ache of those days, the saddest of my public life."

At a public forum on the legacy of the Vietnam War 25 years later he said:

"I pray no American president is ever again faced with this grave option...I still grieve over those we were unable to rescue."

President Ford was thankful that America relocated 130,000 refugees and that to do less would have added moral shame to humiliation.

By 1979, the humanitarian atrocities in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and the amassing refugee problem were championed by President Ford, Senator Kennedy, and a growing number of concerned Americans – and the need to respond ultimately manifested in passage of the Refugee Act of 1980.

After passage of the Refugee Act, our nation primarily resettled refugees from Southeast Asia and the Soviet bloc for nearly two decades. Refugees now arrive from many national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds - representing racial, ethnic, religious and social minorities, the victims of internal conflicts and torture - and typically from situations of life-threatening vulnerability and destitution even after conflict formally end.

The Refugee Act passed over thirty years ago is landmark in establishing special protections for these refugees forced to flee their homelands to seek safe haven.

I doubt that the Congress in 1979 anticipated what the regular flow of refugees would actually look like in the future, but the Refugee Act addresses the need to confront the refugee problem as a permanent phenomenon of global proportions.

Refugee resettlement has outgrown the landscape of expectations for which the Refugee Act was developed in 1980, but we have the benefit of more than thirty years of learning and experience in refugee resettlement to benefit needed reforms; and we should draw on those lessons.

Today, there are an estimated 12 million refugees in the world. Yet less than one percent of all the world's refugees will ever have the opportunity to resettle in a third country like the United States. Even with this limited number of refugees being resettled, there are many political and social hurdles to overcome.

America remains the leader in accepting refugees most in need of resettlement. All the more, U.S. refugee resettlement efforts need particular support to help refugees with their successful transition to life in America.

There's little hope of achieving this without the support of local communities and resettled and established former refugees who have experienced first hand the real needs along with the possibilities of hope and success.

And that's why RISP-Net, the Refugee Integrated Service Provider Network has been so important here in Tucson.

I was approached by Jeannine Chappell shortly after I became Arizona's State Refugee Coordinator, in 2002, and she shared her vision of bringing local mainstream organizations working with refugees, together with refugee resettlement agencies to better understand the goals of refugee resettlement and to better coordinate program efforts and services.

Her interest was providential for me as the State Refugee Coordinator, so I naturally encouraged its development.

I especially encouraged it because I had spent the past ten of my previous 17 years of refugee work learning first hand - in refugee resettlement outside Arizona - why community involvement is so fundamental to successful refugee resettlement.

Our envisioned goal and current statewide strategic planning for Arizona Refugee Resettlement reflect that value ... which is:

"That refugees resettle in welcoming communities that understand their plight and support their journey on the path to becoming successful and contributing members of their new home and country."

Towards achieving this vision, one of our core values in the state refugee resettlement program is the belief that refugee resettlement depends on the welcome of local communities.

That same vision is reflected in RISP-Net's goals:

- Increasing collaboration and communication among systems with a stake in the refugees' successful transition to life in Tucson.
- Identifying needs and issues impacting refugees' effective utilization of and access to services and to advocate for the removal of barriers.
- Bringing the voices of refugees to the table.
- Promoting community-wide support for refugee youth so that they may lead successful lives.
- Locating sources of funding to address identified needs and support each other to bring in new resources.
- Reinforcing strengths that refugees bring to this country and to promote opportunities for them to express those strengths.

And today really is about remembering and celebrating what refugees bring to their new country and communities – despite being borne out of great tragedy, loss and sacrifice.

Today's World Refugee Day event celebrates the realization of a few of RISP-Net's goals:

- Reinforcing the strengths that refugees bring to this country
- Promoting opportunities for them to express those strengths
- And promoting community-wide support for refugee youth so that they may lead successful lives.

...as we have the honor and privileged of sharing in the momentous occasion of some young former refugees taking the final step to becoming a citizen of the United States of America.

To the young soon-to-be naturalized Americans I say: Making the choice to become a U.S. citizen is a defining moment in your lives. And while the basis of your decisions may vary, for a refugee, this day comes after perilous journeys. I trust it is an expression of your love of liberty and commitment to living in accordance with our nation's underlying principles.

America is rooted in immigration, with a legacy of courageous, freedom-loving men and women who have come to America for better lives. You will carry on this American tradition – a tradition that enriches our nation and shapes our society.

I expect I won't be the only one today who speaks to you about the responsibilities that accompany the rights of citizenship. Perhaps these responsibilities have even greater significance to you than to those of us who are citizens by birth. But they truly are precious rights that have been hard won and defended over our nations' history. They are rights enshrined in our Constitution - a Constitution that doesn't limit citizenship by birth or circumstances. You will now have the right to vote in elections, run for public office, hold government jobs not available to non-citizens, remain inside or outside the US without fear of deportation or forfeiture of your citizenship, and you'll be entitled to certain government benefits.

These are rights that reflect a nation that is of, by and for the people. As President Reagan once said, "We are a nation that has a government - not the other way around. And this makes us special among the nations of the earth. Our government has no power except that granted it by the people."

Don't squander these rights. Vote in elections. Run for public office. Remain vigilant of events around you and follow your convictions. Respect the rule of law, and respect the rights of others. Take responsibility for your communities, and help those in need.

As you take this official step to becoming a US Citizen, you're not required to forego your native cultures, and you can help your fellow Americans appreciate these traditions by sharing and celebrating them. You will all be adding your history and culture to the rich American tapestry that has been woven over the centuries. As new citizens, you should also learn about the customs and values that commonly define and unite our nation.

Because you came to this country as refugees, I am especially mindful of how extraordinary this is for you. You have endured being uprooted from your homelands and the worst kinds of inhumanity and injustice. Today, you join the ranks of Americans who have made unsurpassed sacrifices for safety and freedom.

As you take this formal step to make America your country – you're in good company. Many here today have done just what you're doing – and they personify the American tradition of welcoming the tired, the poor, and the tempest tossed yearning to breathe freely.

I applaud your accomplishments that have led you to this point in your lives. Please be active participants in America's history of progress toward the goals of freedom and justice for all.

I congratulate you on your new role as citizens of the United States of America, and I am pleased to call you my fellow Americans.

I applaud all of you here today who are refugees, as well as the more than 60,000 other refugees who have made Arizona home. What you've endured, what you've surmounted, what you've achieved - words can't adequately qualify or convey.

But you do have my sincere admiration.

There are so many people to whom we're beholden here in greater Tucson; and some of those extraordinary people will be recognized today. So let me humbly offer my thanks to the people of Tucson and Pima County, for opening your hearts to refugees for so many years.

Perhaps you're not fully aware of the part you've played in providing protection and hope for refugees. But know that you have my heartfelt thanks for your compassion and generosity in welcoming refugees and helping them find their rightful place in their new community and country.

Thank you for allowing me to join you today for this wonderful celebration.

May God bless you, and may God bless America.